

In 2018, Russian private military contractor forces even assaulted an outpost of Americans in Syria. They were forced to defend themselves, and, of course, they did, and they ultimately routed the Russian force.

So my colleague's stated sentiments do just what Vladimir Putin wants. He wants to divide the United States from our NATO allies and other democracies. He wants to diminish U.S. presence in Europe and to rewrite the European security order in a way that favors his authoritarian interests. We simply cannot allow that to happen.

I could not disagree with my colleague any more on how he has chosen to associate himself. Continuing to block qualified leaders such as Dr. Wallander, Dr. Honey, and Ms. Dalton does not make us stronger; it does not contribute to productive discourse over our national priorities, and it doesn't accomplish what he is trying to accomplish.

If what he wants is answers on Afghanistan, then work with us. Let's work together. Let's make this Commission that we passed in the NDAA—let's make it work. What he wants casts us an unreliable partner to our allies, and it forces the Department of Defense to operate with one hand tied behind their back.

So I am disappointed to hear my colleague—and he talks about regular order. Well, in the last 24 hours, we have confirmed three nominees by regular order. We held up the Senate to get cloture votes. Then we passed Alexandra Baker, the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, 75 to 21. We passed Douglas Bush, Assistant Secretary of the Army, 95 to 2. I don't know if Senator HAWLEY was one of those two. I assume he was. We passed Patrick Coffey, general counsel for the Navy, 79 to 17. Then on February 2, by unanimous consent, we passed Gabriel Camarillo, Under Secretary of the Army, and Andrew Hunter, Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, by unanimous consent.

So this is not about regular order; this is about trying to use the Senate process for his own personal ambitions, and that is unfortunate. It is unfortunate because it doesn't get us the individuals we need to get confirmed to make government run, and it is unfortunate because it doesn't accomplish what he says he wants.

So I am disappointed to hear that we are not going to move these nominees forward, and I hope at some point my colleague will reconsider.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from South Dakota.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak for up to 15-minutes prior to the scheduled roll-call vote.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

ECONOMY

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, the average American household spent an esti-

mated \$3,500 more in expenses last year as a result of inflation—\$3,500. Now, that may not sound like much to a wealthy Democrat politician, but for most American families, that is a lot of money. For a lot of families, \$3,500 is the difference between putting something in savings or living paycheck to paycheck. An additional \$3,500 in expenses can mean having to forgo essential home repairs or needed car work. It can mean putting off braces for a child or forgoing needed medical care.

Now, the White House Chief of Staff may have the budget to regard inflation as a high-class problem, which is how she referred to it, described it, but for ordinary Americans, inflation is a very real problem—a problem that is eating up their wage increases and lowering their standard of living.

We are in the midst of an inflation crisis, a supply chain crisis, and as if those weren't enough, a border crisis. Huge numbers of illegal immigrants are pouring across our southern border and have been pouring across our southern border for months, creating a security, enforcement, and humanitarian nightmare.

So there is a lot for our country's leadership in Washington to be focused on right now. What is the majority party doing about these crises? Well, not much. In fact, most of the time, you can be forgiven for thinking that neither the President nor Democrat leaders even realize there is an inflation crisis or a supply chain crisis or a border crisis. The President, for one, seems to be hoping that if he ignores these crises for long enough, they will just go away.

So what are the President and congressional Democrats doing with their time if they are not addressing our border crisis or inflation crisis? Well, for one thing, they are attempting to double down on the strategy that helped get us into this mess in the first place. That is right. The inflation crisis Democrats would like to ignore is actually something they helped create by flooding the economy with excessive government spending in their so-called American Rescue Plan last March.

For months, they have tried to double down on that bill with another massive spending spree that would flood the economy with more government money and undoubtedly make the inflation crisis worse.

The President has attempted to justify this massive spending legislation by claiming that it will help inflation. Right. So the first massive spending spree helps push us into an inflation crisis, but a second massive spending spree will fix it? I am pretty sure that the definition of "insanity" is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

But massive inflation concerns haven't stopped Democrats. After all, why deal with a boring inflation crisis when you could be thinking up new ways to expand the Federal Government and new ways of taxing Ameri-

cans to pay for it? Of course, Democrats' Build Back Better plan isn't all tax hikes. Democrats did manage to include a tax break in their tax-and-spending proposal—a tax break for blue State millionaires. If they succeed in passing it, I am sure wealthy Democrat donors will be grateful.

While an inflation crisis has raged, Democrats have pushed for new ways to spend taxpayer dollars and expand the reach of the Federal Government into Americans' lives: a huge expansion of government's involvement in childcare that would disadvantage the religious providers so many Americans choose for their children; a massive increase in the size of the IRS; a proposal to allow the IRS to examine the details of Americans' banking transactions; energy policies that would drive up the cost of electricity and gasoline for American families; billions for priorities like tree equity and environmental justice programs at well-funded colleges and universities. The list goes on.

But it would be unfair for me to suggest that Democrats have expended all their energy on tax-and-spending sprees. The administration has also found time to implement provisions of Democrats' original spending spree, the American Rescue Plan, including, apparently, until they got caught, free government crack pipes and other drug paraphernalia.

Democrats spent a lot of time pushing election legislation that they hope will give them an advantage come November.

On the COVID front, the administration struggled with testing, but it has found time for vaccine and mask mandates, some of which I believe have far exceeded the administration's authority. Fortunately, the courts have stepped in to check some of the administration's excesses, like the administration's attempt to impose a vaccine mandate on large private-sector employers or the administration's decision to impose a mask mandate for 2-year-olds—yes, for 2-year-olds.

Your Democratic government at work, ladies and gentlemen.

In November, the administration issued a mask mandate for Head Start programs requiring all children 2 years of age and up to be masked inside and outside—out on the playground. Now, is there scientific evidence to support this? Not really. The World Health Organization, in fact, recommends against masking for children aged 5 and under, but that hasn't stopped the administration. Democrats seem determined that nothing, including science, will pry their masks from them—or perhaps I should say pry our children's masks from them—since Democratic politicians have not always demonstrated the consistency of mask-wearing that they expect from our children.

Democrats wonder why Republicans think we should be careful how much power we give the Federal Government.

If Democrats really wanted to help American families, they would be focusing on our inflation and supply chain crises and addressing the security nightmare posed by our border crisis. Instead, they are busy focusing on ways to secure their hold on power and vastly expand the reach of the Federal Government into Americans' lives. I guess we will have to see how that strategy works out for them.

I yield the floor.

CLOTURE MOTION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Pursuant to rule XXII, the Chair lays before the Senate the pending cloture motion, which the clerk will state.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Executive Calendar No. 705, Max Vekich, of Washington, to be a Federal Maritime Commissioner for a term expiring June 30, 2026.

Charles E. Schumer, Christopher Murphy, Edward J. Markey, Robert P. Casey, Jr., Maria Cantwell, Kirsten E. Gillibrand, Debbie Stabenow, Benjamin L. Cardin, John W. Hickenlooper, Tim Kaine, Gary C. Peters, Christopher A. Coons, Brian Schatz, Richard Blumenthal, Jacky Rosen, Jack Reed, Thomas R. Carper, Cory A. Booker.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. By unanimous consent, the mandatory quorum call has been waived.

The question is, Is it the sense of the Senate that debate on the nomination of Max Vekich, of Washington, to be a Federal Maritime Commissioner for a term expiring June 30, 2026, shall be brought to a close?

The yeas and nays are mandatory under the rule.

The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk called the roll.

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from New Mexico (Mr. LUJÁN) is necessarily absent.

Mr. THUNE. The following Senators are necessarily absent: the Senator from Wyoming (Mr. BARRASSO) and the Senator from Missouri (Mr. BLUNT).

The yeas and nays resulted—yeas 52, nays 45, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 52 Ex.]

YEAS—52

Baldwin	Hickenlooper	Rosen
Bennet	Hirono	Sanders
Blumenthal	Kaine	Schatz
Booker	Kelly	Schumer
Brown	King	Shaheen
Cantwell	Klobuchar	Sinema
Cardin	Leahy	Smith
Carper	Manchin	Stabenow
Casey	Markey	Sullivan
Collins	Menendez	Tester
Coons	Merkley	Van Hollen
Cortez Masto	Murkowski	Warner
Duckworth	Murphy	Warnock
Durbin	Murray	Warren
Feinstein	Ossoff	Whitehouse
Gillibrand	Padilla	Wyden
Hassan	Peters	
Heinrich	Reed	

NAYS—45

Blackburn	Burr	Cornyn
Boozman	Capito	Cotton
Braun	Cassidy	Cramer

Crapo	Johnson	Rounds
Cruz	Kennedy	Rubio
Daines	Lankford	Sasse
Ernst	Lee	Scott (FL)
Fischer	Lummis	Scott (SC)
Graham	Marshall	Shelby
Grassley	McConnell	Thune
Hagerty	Moran	Tillis
Hawley	Paul	Toomey
Hooven	Portman	Tuberville
Hyde-Smith	Risch	Wicker
Inhofe	Romney	Young

NOT VOTING—3

Barrasso	Blunt	Luján
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The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SCHATZ). On this vote, the yeas are 52, the nays are 45.

The motion is agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

UKRAINE

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, before I begin, I would like to ask unanimous consent to put into the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD an open letter to the Russian leadership from the Russian Congress of Intellectuals, who state:

Our position is simple: Russia does not need a war with Ukraine and the West. Such a war is devoid of legitimacy and has no moral basis.

This is a very brave statement made by Russian intellectuals.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the New York Review of Books, Feb. 4, 2022]

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE RUSSIAN LEADERSHIP RUSSIAN CONGRESS OF INTELLECTUALS

Our position is simple: Russia does not need a war with Ukraine and the West. Such a war is devoid of legitimacy and has no moral basis.

There is an ever-increasing flow of alarming news about a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine. Reports are emerging about stepped-up recruitment of mercenaries within Russia and the transfer of fuel and military equipment to Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In response, Ukraine is arming itself and NA TO is sending additional forces into Eastern Europe. The tension is not abating, but rather mounting.

Russian citizens are becoming de facto hostages of a reckless adventurism that has come to typify Russia's foreign policy. Not only must Russians live with the uncertainty of whether a large-scale war will begin, but they are also experiencing a sharp rise in prices and a devaluation of their currency. Is this the sort of policy Russians need? Do they want war—and are they ready to bear the brunt of it? Have they authorized the authorities to play with their lives in this way?

But no one asks Russian citizens for their opinion. There is no public debate. State television presents only a single viewpoint—that of the warmongers. Direct military threats, aggression and hatred are aimed at Ukraine, the US, and the West. But the most dangerous thing is that the war is being depicted not only as permissible, but as inevitable. This is an attempt to deceive the population, to impose upon them the idea of waging a crusade against the West, rather than investing in the country's development and improving living standards. The cost of the conflict is never discussed, but the price—the huge, bloody price—will be paid by the common Russian people.

We, responsible citizens and patriots of Russia, appeal to Russia's political leader-

ship. We openly and publicly call out the Party of War that has been formed within the government.

We represent the viewpoint of those in Russian society who reject war, who consider unlawful the use of military threats and the deployment of a blackmailing style in foreign policy.

We reject war, whereas you, the Party of War, consider it acceptable. We stand for peace and prosperity for all Russian citizens, whereas you put our lives on the line for the sake of political games. You deceive and manipulate people, whereas we tell them the truth. You do not speak in the name of the Russian population—we do. For decades, the Russian people, who lost millions of lives in past wars, have lived by the saying: "if only there were no war." Have you forgotten this?

Our position is quite simple. Russia does not need a war with Ukraine and the West. No one is threatening us, no one is attacking us. Policies based on the idea of such a war are immoral and irresponsible and must not be conducted in the name of the Russian people. Such a war is devoid of legitimacy and has no moral basis. Russian diplomacy should take no other position than a categorical rejection of such a war.

Not only does such a war not reflect Russia's interests, but it also threatens the country's very existence. The senseless actions of the country's political leadership, which is pushing us in this direction, will inevitably lead to a mass anti-war movement in Russia. Each of us will naturally play a part in it.

We will do everything in our power to prevent this war, and if it begins, to stop it.

Signed,

Lev Ponomarev, human rights activist; Valery Borshchev, human rights activist; Svetlana Gannushkina, human rights activist; Leonid Gozman, politician; Liya Akhedzhakova, actress and People's Artist of the Russian Federation; Andrey Makarevich, musician; Garri Bardin, director; Viktor Shenderovich, writer; Tatiana Lazareva, TV presenter; Andrey Zubov, historian and politician; Andrey Nechaev, politician; Alina Vitukhnovskaya, writer; Alexander Belavin, physicist; Nikolai Rozanov, corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Natalia Evdokimova, executive secretary of the Human Rights Council of St. Petersburg; Efim Khazanov, academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences; Hya Ginzburg, physicist and professor; Zoya Svetova, journalist; Grigory Yavlinsky, politician; Lev Shlosberg, politician; Boris Vishnevsky, politician; Lev Gudkov, sociologist and professor; Igor Chubais, philosopher; Tatyana Voltskaya, poet and journalist; Boris Sokolov, historian and writer; Mikhail Krieger, civic activist; Veronika Dolina, poet; Vladimir Mirzoev, director; Ksenia Larina, journalist.

Andrey Piontkovsky, publicist; Mark Urnov, professor, National Research University Higher School of Economics; Mikhail Lavrenov, writer; Nikolai Prokudin, writer; Elena Panailova, poet and journalist; Grigory Mikhnov-Vaytenko, clergyman; Lev Levinson, human rights activist; Sergei Germann, member of the Writer's Union of Russia; Vladimir Alex, civil activist; Yuri Gimmelfarb, journalist; Yuri Samodurov, human rights activist; Evgeniy Tsymlal, civil activist; Vitaly Dixon, writer; Natalya Mavlevich, translator; Ashraf Fattakhov, lawyer.

Viktor Yunak, writer; Valeria Prikhodkina, human rights activist; Elena Grigorieva, children's poet; Vera Shabelnikova, editor; Mair Makhaev, philosopher and linguist; Grigory Amnuel, producer, director, publicist, and politician. Sergei Krivenko, human rights activist;